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ROOSEVELT AND VENEZUELA

BY HERBERT W. BOWEN

EX-UNITED STATES MINISTER TO VENEZUELA

In the July number of THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW Mr. William Roscoe Thayer states, in his article about President Roosevelt, that "Mr. Roosevelt allowed Mr. Herbert W. Bowen, the American Minister to Venezuela, to serve as Special Commissioner for Venezuela in conducting her negotiations with Germany"; but that "he himself took the matter into his own hands at Washington," and that "having sounded England and Italy," and learning "that they were willing to arbitrate," he directed "his diplomatic attack straight at the Kaiser."

As a matter of fact, I was never a Special Commissioner, nor was my work for Venezuela ever limited to dealing with Germany exclusively.

President Castro, on December 9, 1902, when Great Britain and Germany seized his warships and began the blockade of his ports, requested me to represent Venezuela, and I cabled¹ that same day to Mr. Hay, stating that Venezuela would like to have her differences with Great Britain and Germany settled by arbitration. On December 11, I cabled again to Mr. Hay, asking him whether he would forward the suggestion regarding arbitration to Great Britain and Germany. On the following day Mr. Hay cabled to me that he had forwarded the suggestion "without comment." Receiving no reply from Great Britain and Germany, I cabled to Mr. Hay again on December 15, expressing impatience. The next day Mr. Hay wired me that he had "repeated proposition to arbitrate, with strong recommendation." On December 17 Italy joined the Anglo-German alliance, and the entire naval force of the three allied Powers now consisted of three small German cruisers, two small British cruisers, and two small Italian cruisers, which were divided into three fleets—one at or near Maracaibo, another at Puerto Cabello, and the third at La Guaira, which is the port of Caracas. The forts at Maracaibo were able to protect that port; so I advised President Castro to divide his forces, which consisted of 14,000 trained soldiers, between Puerto Cabello and La Guaira, and to hold them well back from the water front so as to avoid incidents that might bring on actual warfare, but to make instant use

¹ See official documents in our Red Book, called *Foreign Relations*, and Blue Book, called *Venezuelan Protocols*, for all cablegrams mentioned in this article, except Mr. White's, which was private.

of them all in case an attempt was made by the allies to land and seize his territory. He agreed to comply with my request.

On December 27, Mr. Hay's "strong recommendation" had produced the desired effect, and both Great Britain and Germany agreed to arbitrate. Great Britain's answer began with these words: "His Majesty's Government have, in consultation with the German Government, taken into careful consideration the proposal communicated by the United States Government *at the instance of that of Venezuela.*"¹

The italicized clause proves conclusively that both Great Britain and Germany understood that the proposal to arbitrate was not President Roosevelt's nor Mr. Hay's, but Venezuela's. Mr. Thayer in his article does not mention that clause, nor does he refer to any of the cablegrams that passed between Mr. Hay and me. He simply dates the beginning of the arbitration plan at the time when Italy joined the alliance, and that was, as I have stated, December 17. The position held by the United States Government from the moment Mr. Hay made his "strong recommendation" until the agreement to arbitrate was effected, was that of mediator, while mine was that of representative of Venezuela, with full powers. As it was decided that I should go to Washington, the full powers which I had been exercising since the blockade began, at the request of President Castro, were formally conferred on me on January 7, 1903, and they were worded thus:

"The Venezuelan Government grants full powers to Mr. Herbert W. Bowen to effect at Washington, with the diplomatic representatives of the nations that have claims against Venezuela, the immediate settlement of them or the preliminaries for the submission to arbitration of such of them as cannot be settled immediately." These nations included Great Britain, Germany, Italy, France, Belgium, Spain, The Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, Mexico and the United States.

I arrived in Washington January 20, 1903, just ten days after Ambassador Holleben sailed for Germany, and I proceeded forthwith to settle all of Venezuela's difficulties with the ten nations just mentioned, except one matter which I might easily have settled also, but which for good and sufficient reasons I preferred to take to The Hague, and that was the question of "preferential treatment," or the question as to whether or not Great Britain, Germany and Italy should be paid by Venezuela before she paid her other seven creditors. I saw Mr. Hay frequently, and twice I talked the situation over at some length with President Roosevelt, and I had every reason to believe that I had the full confidence of both of them, and that they had communicated to me all the information in their possession regarding their work as mediators. Neither of them even suggested to me that Mr. Roosevelt had threatened the Kaiser; on the contrary, they both expressed considerable apprehension as to what the Kaiser might do to involve the United States in serious trouble. On one occasion; about two weeks after Ambassador Holleben's recall, I remember distinctly being sent for in haste by Mr. Hay and being told that a private cablegram had just arrived from Mr. Henry White, Chargé of the American Embassy in London, stating that Germany had made a very war-

¹ The italics are mine.

like proposal to Great Britain. Mr. Hay was decidedly alarmed, and he said that President Roosevelt and he both thought that I ought to modify my terms at once. I expressed the belief that Great Britain would remain loyal to her agreement to arbitrate, unless, of course, President Castro disregarded his promise to me not to commit any aggressive act against the blockading Powers, and I stated that I felt sure that he would not fail me. I therefore declined to make any change in my terms. The following day a reassuring cablegram arrived from London, and a feeling of intense relief was thereupon evinced at both the White House and the Department of State.

In view of the foregoing facts, it is difficult to understand how Mr. Roosevelt, some fifteen years after the Venezuelan incident was closed, could convince himself that he had frightened the Kaiser, or how Mr. Thayer could believe the story and deftly embellish it with such comments as he made about "poor, servile, old bureaucratic Holleben!" and about Dewey's fleet being able to "blow all the German Navy out of the water in half an hour." Dewey certainly understood just how strong the alliance was that blockaded the Venezuelan coasts, for he told me himself just after I had signed the protocols that if he had been ordered to make an attack he would have had his ships sink all the British, German and Italian ships in sight, and then seek safety in our own harbors.

Mr. Roosevelt was evidently aware that the weak point in his story was the great strength of the Anglo-German-Italian alliance, for he explained that before trying to scare the Kaiser he sounded England and Italy, and induced them to stand aside temporarily, in case he got into trouble with Germany, until he had chastised her; but, as I wrote to the *New York Times*¹ immediately after Mr. Roosevelt first told the story in public, *Off-and-on alliances, while you wait, are unknown to diplomacy.*

Had Great Britain made any such agreement as that, she would have been guilty of treachery to her German ally; and if Italy, who at the time was a permanent ally of Germany's, had consented to the scheme, she would have run the risk of receiving severe chastisement for her perfidy. It is very difficult for a fair-minded man to associate treachery with Great Britain, or perfidy with Italy, and probably no fair-minded man will.

Of course it is not only possible, but probable, that Mr. Roosevelt did make some perfectly legitimate and polite effort to sustain Mr. Hay's "strong recommendation" to Great Britain and Germany to accept Venezuela's offer to arbitrate, and that he had a quarrel with Ambassador Holleben because that astute gentleman had induced him to prepare the way for the blockade by defining the Monroe Doctrine in his message to Congress as "not intended to guarantee any state against punishment if it misconducts itself, provided that punishment does not take the form of acquisition of territory by any non-American Power;" but these matters were not referred to either by Mr. Roosevelt or Mr. Thayer, both of whom confined themselves to asserting that the Kaiser had been frightened into arbitration by threats.

Of course a credulous public may be induced by eminent men

¹ See my letter in that newspaper dated March 23, 1917.

to believe almost any kind of story, especially in war times, provided it does not carry its own refutation with it. In this case the story is bristling with refutations, not the least of which is Mr. Thayer's declaration that after Mr. Roosevelt had actually frightened the Kaiser into arbitration, he announced to the public that the Kaiser was "a good friend and practiser of arbitration."

The natural deduction to draw from that declaration is that President Roosevelt made a fool of the public to please the Kaiser, and then made a fool of the Kaiser to please the public.

But however imaginative the whole story is, it will doubtless be remembered always as one of Mr. Roosevelt's most popular campaign stories, and as one of Mr. Thayer's masterpieces of transcription.

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